

THOSE WHO DESIRE

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A SERMON
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*“O LORD, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant,
and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name.”*

Nehemiah 1:11

NEHEMIAH was earnest in his prayer for the good of his sorrow-stricken nation, but he did not make the mistake of thinking that he was the only praying man in the world. He said, “Be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name.” In this one respect, I like Nehemiah better than Elijah. They were both noble men and greatly concerned for the highest welfare of their fellow countrymen, but at one time at least, Elijah did not have a true or a fair estimate of things as they really were.

He even presumed to say to God, “I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.” Nehemiah, however, acted on another and a more hopeful principle. When he had presented his own personal supplication, he felt certain that there were others who were also praying to the Lord, so he said, “Be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name.”

You know, dear friends, that Elijah was quite wrong in his calculation, for God said to him, “I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.” There were hidden in caves or in other parts of the country, thousands who feared God and bowed the knee to Him alone. Let not any of us fall into the mistake that Elijah made.

Do not you, my brother, claim to be the solitary prophet of God, and say, “I only am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.” There are quite as good men as you are elsewhere in the world and there are other people who are as earnest in prayer as you are. If you get to supposing that you are the only man left who holds sound doctrine, you will become a bigot.

And if you think that you are the only praying man on the earth, you will most likely prove to be self-righteous. If you fancy you are the only man who has a deep spiritual experience, probably you will be doing a great wrong to others of your Lord's servants and speaking evil of those whom He has accepted. It is better far to believe, with Nehemiah, that your suppliant voice is not a solitary one—and that there are many who, like yourself, cry day and night unto God.

I think it would be better to go even a little further and to believe that, if you are earnest, there are others who are still more earnest, and that if you possess a deep-toned piety, there are some who have even more than you have. So, instead of separating yourself from your brethren and sisters in Christ, as though you stood first and foremost—hope and believe that you are only one small star in a great constellation—one tiny speck in the milky way of divine light with which God still studs the evening sky of this world's history. Take a hopeful view of things and you will be more likely to be near the mark than if you judge others severely and imagine yourself to be the only faithful servant of the Lord.

It is quite clear that Nehemiah valued the prayers of others, for he pleaded with God, “Be attentive”—not only “to the prayer of thy servant,” but also “to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to

fear thy name.” Beloved friends, there is a great value in the prayers of God’s people, so we ought to set great store by them.

If you ever wish to do me a good turn, pray for me. And if you would be the means of blessing your fellow Christians, incessantly pray for them. You may think that your petition is of small account, but it is the many “littles” that make up the great whole. A pinch of incense from each worshipper will fill the house of the Lord with sweet perfume. Small lumps of coal cast into the glowing furnace will still further increase its heat. Do not think that we can afford to lose your prayers, whoever you may be, but cheerfully contribute it to the general treasury of the church’s devotion.

It seems to me that the persons to whom Nehemiah referred may be regarded as rather weak servants of God, for they were those who *desired* to fear His name. Perhaps it could not actually be said that they did fear it, but they desired to do so. Still, Nehemiah felt grateful even for their prayers and we cannot afford to lose the prayer of a single godly child or of the most feeble Christian among us.

Do not twit him about his shortcomings and say that his prayer is useless. No, my dear weak brother, we need your supplication. Even Abraham could not afford to lose the prayer of Lot, for Abraham’s prayer alone did not save a single city of the plain—but poor miserable Lot was able to bring just the last ounce of intercession that turned the sacred scale—he contributed a very little prayer and thus one city was saved from destruction.

Well, then, if Lot’s prayer was needed at the back of Abraham’s mighty pleading, perhaps the petition of the very least among us may, in God’s judgment, suffice to turn the scale in some other instance. The Lord may say, “The prayers of My people have prevailed now that this last one has added his request.”

If one of you should stay away from the prayer meeting and thus not contribute your share to the supplication of the whole church because you think you are not a person of much consequence, it may be that yours is the last prayer which is needed to complete the chain, so that it would prevail even as Lot’s did. We shall certainly not lose any blessing if you add your prayers to ours, but we shall gain by them. We wish, therefore, to offer to God not only the prayers of any servant of His who is strong, as Nehemiah was, but also the prayers of any of His servants who desire to fear His name.

I am now going to speak concerning those of whom it is said that they *desire* to fear God’s name. I have already described them as being rather feeble folk, yet all who are included in this class are not alike weak. Still, as a rule, it does indicate an early stage of the working of God’s grace when we can only say of them that they desire to fear God’s name. The two remarks I shall make upon the text are these. First, that *this description includes all who have any true religion*. And secondly, that *this description includes many grades of grace*.

I. First, then, THIS DESCRIPTION INCLUDES ALL WHO HAVE ANY TRUE RELIGION—they desire to fear God’s name.

For, first, *true religion is always a matter of desire*. If you do not desire to fear God, you do not fear Him. If you do not feel any desire after that which is right in God’s sight, you have not anything at all right in your heart.

Some have a religion that is all a matter of custom. They go to a certain place of worship simply because they were brought up to go there. Their father went before them and their grandfather went before him—so they follow in their steps as a mere matter of form. If we were to say to them, “Now, do whatever you like, do not take any notice of what anybody else has done, or is doing, but just please yourself”—in all probability they would not go any longer—or if they did, it would be from sheer force of custom.

These are the people who say that our Sundays are very dull and that our religious services are—well, I need not repeat what they say of them—but they do not enjoy them, for they have in their hearts no desire towards fearing God, or towards His worship in the public assembly. They would be far happier if they could go to some place of worldly amusement, or idly loiter by the seaside, for the worship of God’s house is a weariness to them, and they are glad when the Sabbath is past.

If this is true of any of you, dear friends, do not deceive yourselves about your real condition, for it is clear that you have not any religion at all. If your presence in the sanctuary is not a matter of your own deliberate choice, if you do not desire to fear God's name, there is nothing in it that is acceptable to the Most High, for God abhors the sacrifice where the heart is not found.

What blessing can result from your coming into His courts and rendering only hypocritical worship? What are you doing, after all, every Sabbath day, but sending into God's house the mere pretense of a man, if your heart is not here. Your coat is here, your flesh is here, but not your very self and therefore the form of worship is a mere mockery.

There are others, whose fear of God arises entirely from dread. They dare not go to bed at night without offering some sort of prayer—not because they have any real desire to pray or to commune with God, but through fear as to what might happen if they omitted their usual form. They would not allow a Sunday to pass without attending the means of grace at least once—not because they have any desire to go, or any delight in the services of God's house, but because they are afraid not to go.

Yet we must always remember that the religion of dread is not the religion of Christ. That which you do because you are afraid to act otherwise is no evidence of a renewed heart—it is, rather, the proof that you are a slave, living in dread of the lash, and that you would act far otherwise if you dared. But the child of God loves his heavenly Father and delights to worship Him.

Oftentimes, when the Sabbath is about to close, he says,—

*“My willing soul would stay
In such a frame as this,
And sit and sing herself away
To everlasting bliss.”*

He delights in the worship of God. It is his element, his pleasure, his treasure—and he loves it without measure.

So, dear friends, by this test shall you judge yourselves, for true religion is always a thing of desire. I do verily believe that attendance at public worship in this Tabernacle is a thing of desire to very many. I see people walking to some places of worship in such a sad and solemn way that they look as if they were going to be flogged or burned.

But I notice how joyfully most of you trip along when you are coming here. You are glad when the Sabbath arrives and you look forward to it with delight. May it always be so with you, for you may rest assured that there is no worship which is so acceptable to God as that which we from our heart desire to render to Him.

And so, dear friends, I come back to the assertion that all true religion must be a thing of desire. And not only is this generally true, but if you dissect piety and devotion, you will find that *every part of it must be a matter of desire*. Take repentance, for instance, and I am sure I may say that there never was a man who repented who did not desire to repent. The Holy Spirit never makes anyone repent without his desiring to do it—that would be an impossible thing.

So is it with faith—no man believes against his will—to the saving of his soul. There must be a desire to trust Christ or else there cannot be true faith. In like manner, no man ever loves God without a desire to do so. It would be an absurdity even to talk of such a thing. Indeed, there is no Christian grace which can be exercised without the desire to exercise it.

So, there is no act of worship which can be performed aright unless it arises from desire. A man never really praises God until he desires to do so. You cannot sit still and say, “I joined in praising God involuntarily.”

Desire is also the very life-blood of prayer. An unwilling prayer would be a hollow mockery. If I pray that which I am forced to pray, I insult God. So is it with the observance of the ordinances of the Christian religion. The time was, you know—and not very many years ago—when no man could be a

member of a corporation, or could be employed in the service of Her Majesty unless he would take what some people still erroneously call, “the sacrament.” Cowper truly said that they made the ordinances of Christ into a picklock of office.

But do you suppose that a man who took “the sacrament” in order that he might be made into a mayor, or a sheriff, or a member of Parliament, ever had in that act any real communion with Christ? It is all but blasphemous to suppose such a thing. The right observance of the ordinance must be a matter of a Christian’s own free will—the grace of God must make him desire thus to show forth his Lord’s death. Anyone who pretends to observe either of the ordinances of Christ from any motive but holy desire, makes a mockery of them and certainly does not use them aright.

Desire must be at the back of every religious act or else there is nothing at all in it. It is so in the case of almsgiving. Always take heed that you do not give to the poor, or to any charity, or to the funds of the church simply because you are asked to do so, for, unless you really desire to give what you appear to present, you have not in God’s sight given it at all.

If, in your heart of hearts you feel, “I wish I had dodged round the pillar, or gone down the other aisle, and so escaped having to give,” you have not truly offered anything to God. The shrewd Scotchman’s remark was quite right when a man said to him, “I have given a half-crown to the collection when I only intended to give a penny,” and asked if he could have it back. “No,” said the Scotchman, “when it is once in, it is in for good.” “Well,” said the man, “I shall get credit for half-a-crown, at any rate.” “Oh, no you won’t,” said the canny Scot, “you only intended to give a penny and you will not get credit for any more than that.”

There is another thing that is worthy of observation. That is, wherever there is this holy desire, even if there is no power to carry it into action, *the desire is itself so much the very essence of true religion that God accepts it*. Desire is acceptable, for instance, in the matter of almsgiving even where no alms can be given. According to what a man has, and not according to what he has not, is the measure of acceptance for his gift.

David, you remember, wished to build the temple, but God would not let him carry out that great work because his hands had been stained with blood. Yet the Lord said to him, “Whereas it was in thine heart to build an house unto my name, you didst well that it was in your heart. Nevertheless thou shalt not build the house; but thy son that shall come forth out of thy loins, he shall build the house unto my name.”

And God accepted the will for the deed and blessed David accordingly. This principle may afford encouragement to any of you who perhaps feels, “I cannot do much for the Lord’s cause, but I am quite willing to do all that I can.” Be ready to give or to act whenever you have the power—and God, our gracious Lord, will take the will for the deed whenever your desire cannot be translated into action.

But recollect one solemn fact, and that is that *wherever there is a man who has not even the desire to fear God, there is condemnation*. Such a man must be indeed dead in trespasses and sins. If that is your case, my friend, you have never repented and you say that you do not desire to repent. You have never believed in Christ Jesus and you confess that you have no desire to do so. You have never, in spirit and in truth, worshipped the God who made you and you have no desire to do so. You have never confessed your sin and sought pardon for it, and you say that you have no desire to do so.

Well, you scarcely need, I think, that I should pronounce over you the sentence of condemnation which God’s Word declares to be yours. Does not your own conscience tell you how far you must be from the right road when you are not honest and you say, “I do not want to be honest”? What a confirmed rogue such an individual must be!

If a man says, “I am not chaste in life and I do not want to be chaste,” you know how debauched he must be when he not only sins, but finds pleasure in the iniquity, and boasts that he has no wish to be delivered from the evil. God have mercy upon you, my friend, if that is your case! But I pray you to stand convicted of your guilt and to cry unto God to change your heart, and renew your will, and make you at least to desire to be right, for where that desire is really cherished, there is something good and

hopeful about you. But where there is not even a desire after that which is right, and pure, and holy—what can we say but “Woe be unto you unless you repent”?

II. Now, in the second, place, I want to show you that THE DESCRIPTION GIVEN IN OUR TEXT—“Thy servants, who desire to fear thy name”—INCLUDES MANY GRADES OF GRACE.

It does not, however, include some who would like to be included in it. Here is, for instance, a man who says, “I am not a Christian, but I sometimes desire to be one.” Yes, my friend, that is on Sunday night when you are in the company of God’s people, but what about Saturday night? What about Friday night, when you received your week’s wages? You did not desire to be a Christian, then, I think—at least, when you got home to your wife and family, they could not suppose, from the way you walked, that you had any desire of that sort.

Here is another man who says, “I desire to be a Christian,” yet he is contemplating attendance at some playhouse or other each night in the week, and he is arranging to spend a great part of his time in the company of the ungodly. I say frankly that I do not believe in that man’s desire to be saved. My friend, your goodness is like the early cloud or the morning dew—we sometimes have a faint hope concerning you, but while your desires come and go as they have done, there is a text of Scripture that just suits you, and we advise you to take it home to yourself—“The soul of the sluggard desireth, and hath nothing.”

You are like a man lying in bed and all the while saying, “I desire to plough my field, but I do not mean to get up at present.” The sun has long risen. Indeed, it is high noon, but he still says, “I desire to plough my fields, but I do not intend to get up just yet.” And so he sleeps on through the whole day. He keeps on saying that he desires to plough his field and to sow it, but the weather is not favorable—it is either too hot or too cold—it is too dry one day, and too wet another, so he goes on desiring and does nothing. The man is a fool, or something worse, and alas! we have many such foolish folk who are always desiring, and desiring, and desiring, and yet nothing comes of their desires.

There is a tombstone erected in memory of a prince who died some little while ago—I will not say where he used to live, but his principality was badly managed, I should think, for he never did a good thing in his life except by mistake. No one ever credited him with having done any good. And when he was dead, they put upon his tombstone this inscription, “He was a man of excellent intentions.” Yes, and that is all that will be able to be said of many others when they come to die, “They were men of excellent intentions—sometimes.”

Such people are very different from those to whom Nehemiah referred in his prayer—“O LORD, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of *thy servants, who desire to fear thy name.*” Who are those who are included in this description?

Beginning at the bottom, I should say, first, *the man who has an earnest desire to be right.* I remember once asking a man if he was a Christian, and he answered, “I am very sorry to say that I am not saved. But oh, sir, I do wish that I were!” I looked at him with much yearning in my heart and I saw how earnestly he meant what he had said, and I then went on to inquire why he was not a Christian if he longed to be one, because the great point is to get men to desire to be saved—and when they do desire it, what is there to hinder them from having the blessing?

When a boat is guided by a rudder, it only needs that the rudder should be turned in a particular way and the boat will turn at once. And when a man’s heart is so turned that he says, “I really desire to be right with God, I long to be a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ”—when that is not merely a passing fancy, but when he can truly say, “I am always desiring this. I earnestly and vehemently desire it”—why, such a man is not far from the kingdom of God.

There is, however, this remark to be added—*he must not be content with that desire, but must carry it into action.* Suppose that it is time for me to eat my dinner and that I sit down at the table with the joint before me and say, “I desire to eat”—and yet I simply sit looking at the meat? I have my knife and fork ready, and I say that I am earnestly desiring to eat—would not anyone who was near me say, “Then, why do you not eat? There is the meat before you. Help yourself.”

Ah! dear friend, that is what I have long tried to induce you to do in the matter of food for your soul. Do you not know that all the provisions of the Gospel are free to all who desire to partake of them? If you have a willing mind, you may come and you will be heartily welcome. There is nothing to hinder you, for all that there is in Christ is free to all who will come to Him. Every soul that really desires to have Christ can have Him.

Perhaps someone asks, “How may I take Him, then?” Why, *simply by trusting Him and entrusting yourself to Him*. You know how I have often put it to you, using that verse in which the apostle Paul says, “The word is nigh you, even in thy mouth.” Then swallow it, if it is in your mouth, let it go down into your inmost being—that is all you have to do—take it into your very soul.

I do not know of a more beautiful emblem of faith, after all, than that idea of swallowing the truth, receiving it, eating and drinking it—taking Christ, who is the truth, into your inmost self. Only trust Him and you will no longer cry, “I desire to fear the Lord,” for it will be true that you do really fear Him.

Now we will go up a stage higher. There are some, included in this number of those who desire to fear God, *who really do fear Him, but are afraid they do not*, so they dare not say that they fear God, but they confess that they desire to fear Him. Now this is a kind of holy modesty which, if it is not carried too far, is even commendable.

The first thing that certain men in Greece did was to call themselves sophists, or wise men. When they grew wiser, they called themselves philosophists, or philosophers, that is lovers of wisdom. And sometimes, a man who at first calls himself by a very big name, when he gets to be really bigger, is content with a smaller title.

I have known some people who have been very sure about their own conversion, but I did not feel anything like so sure about them. And I have known others who were never sure about their own safety, but always felt a sacred anxiety lest they should not be right, yet I felt quite sure about them, for I always saw in them the marks and evidences of deep sincerity and holy watchfulness.

There are many of God’s true children who hardly dare call themselves by that privileged name. But there are others who are very sure about their position, to whom we would commend the words of the poet Cowper,—

*“Come, then, a still, small whisper in your ear,—
He has no hope who never had a fear;
And he that never doubted of his state,
He may, perhaps—perhaps he may—too late.”*

There is such a thing as never doubting when you ought to doubt. But on the other hand, I do not want our dear modest friends always to be saying, “I hope and I trust,” yet never to get any further. Why, surely the Word of God is very plain and the way of salvation is very simple. “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life.”

Then, if you believe on Him, you have everlasting life. The man who really trusts Christ, loves and fears God—and if you love Him and can say, “Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee,” then you are a God-fearing man. If you are relying for salvation upon Jesus Christ and have no other trust, then you need not say, “I hope I am saved.” You may be sure that you are saved.

Still, God forbid that I should ever seem to condemn those whom God accepts, so, if all you dare to say is that you desire to fear Him, give me your hand, my brother, give me your hand, my sister—though you are weak and feeble, and your enjoyment of the things of God is but slender, you are in the King’s family, one of the redeemed, and your prayer is needed to be united with ours, so let us have it and God will accept it.

Let us advance a step further. Those who desire to fear God are found among those who know that they do fear Him and dare to confess it, but who, nevertheless, are afraid that *their imperfections are so abundant that their religion still lies more in the region of desire than of attainment*. I remember being in the company of a person who was talking very much about his own growth in grace.

If I remember rightly, he said something about a higher life that God gives to all His people and he boasted very much about his own attainments. There was another brother there who said nothing, so the first speaker turned to him, and asked, "Have not you got any religion." "Yes," he meekly replied, "but I never had any to boast of." I would rather join with the second man than the first.

The man who does not believe that he might be any better has very little good at present. He who thinks that he has got to the end of perfection is probably at the wrong end of it. No, no, my brethren, those of us who fear God most desire to fear Him more. We have repented, but we want to have a deeper repentance. We do believe in Jesus, but we long to have a stronger faith. We hope to have a brighter, clearer hope than we at present possess. We do serve God, but we wish to serve Him ten times as much as we have ever done.

Have I any zeal? Oh, that the zeal of His house might eat me up! Am I a saint? Oh, that I might be more fully sanctified and that sin might be more thoroughly overthrown! There is yet very much left to be desired in the best of us—there is great room for further progress and we must keep on pressing forward toward that which is before and forget that which is behind. In this sense, then, we are all amongst those who desire to fear God's name even when we do fear it.

Let us advance another step. There are some who desire to fear God's name in a sense which, no doubt, was intended by Nehemiah. The poor Jews at Jerusalem could not worship God as they wished to do—there was no temple, no altar, no sacrifice. They could not carry out the ceremonials and festivities which God had ordained, so *they desired to show that they feared God's name more publicly and more openly, and to do it more thoroughly and with greater freedom and less hindrance.*

I daresay I am speaking to some dear child of God who says, "That is just my case—I do desire to fear God's name, but I am hampered in many ways." You have conscientious convictions and you are placed just now where you cannot carry them out. You are as yet under age, perhaps, and parental authority is interposed, and you say, "I cannot do what I believe to be right, but I do desire to fear God's name." Hold on to that, dear brother, and do all that you can do, and God will enlarge the place of your footsteps by and by.

I have known servants who could not get out to the house of God and other persons placed in positions in the family where they could not enjoy the means of grace, and persons living in villages where they have been obliged, if they went to any place of worship at all, to go where the Gospel was not preached.

If that is your case, you may well say that you desire to fear God's name and want more liberty and greater scope. And though you may, at this present moment, be like Naaman the Syrian, and have to bow in the house of Rimmon, I wish you would not do it—I wish you would give up Rimmon and his house. But still, with all the imperfections with which your circumstances surround you, I know some of you, who are God's true children, are in a dreadful fix and do not know what to do. I want to include you within the lines of those whom God will bless so long as you desire to fear His name.

Cry mightily to God about it and He will yet bring you better days. The apostle Paul said that, if a man who was a slave was converted to God, and he could not lawfully get out of his position, he could glorify God as a slave. And you may do the same wherever your lot may be cast. Make it the subject of prayer that you may be able to serve God whatever happens.

Perhaps you dwell in Mesech, when you go home tonight, you cannot gather at the family altar, you cannot mention Christ's name in the house where you live without setting blasphemous tongues going directly. Let it be your desire that God will place you in other circumstances—and if He does, then carry out what you desire. Do not let the associations in which you are placed cause your piety to degenerate lest, when God gives you enlargement, you should not have an enlarged heart at the same time and continue to live as you are now when there will be no excuse for your doing so.

To close my discourse, let me say that the very highest form of devotion we can ever reach is included in the description in the text, "Thy servants who desire to fear thy name," for I find that some of our translators and expositors read it, "who *delight* to fear thy name." There is not much variation in

it, after all, because to desire to fear God's name is much the same thing as doing it as a matter of *delight*.

Come, beloved, God grant that we may all get to be of that number who delight to fear His name. May we be of those to whom it is a pleasure and a joy to be the soldiers of the cross, the followers of the Lamb, to whom prayer is recreation, to whom praise is paradise, to whom the service of God is heaven. We are not slaves now, but happy children who delight in God, and joy in Him. And we can sing with our sacred poet,—

*“I need not go abroad for joys,
I have a feast at home;
My sighs are turned into songs,
My heart has ceased to roam.*

*“Down from above the blessed Dove
Is come into my breast,
To witness Thine eternal love,
And give my spirit rest.”*

O yes, we delight to fear God! Our misery is that we cannot fear Him as we would. Our sorrow is if we ever fall into sin. A child of God cannot find pleasure there. He may be led into sin, but he will be whipped for it, and he will whip himself for it. He will groan, and cry, and sigh to think how wrong he was to go astray. But his greatest delight is in the law of the Lord and in His law does he meditate day and night.

Thus I have shown you that this description comprehends all ranges and grades of grace. God grant that we may all come in under the description, and may we then take care to present our prayers with those of all who fear God's name. Be at the prayer meetings whenever you can, and I beg you to pray at home, and to join the people of God wherever prayer is offered, even though some of you at present only desire to fear His name. And may the Lord bless you all, for His dear name's sake! Amen.

EXPOSITION BY C. H. SPURGEON

NEHEMIAH 1

Verses 1-2. *The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace, that Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.*

Nehemiah was in a high office in Shushan the palace of King Artaxerxes, but his heart was at Jerusalem. He therefore remembered the very date, “in the month Chisleu,” when some of his brethren came from Judah to visit him, for he was more interested in their coming than in any transaction of the court in which he was for a while employed.

Observe the subject of this good man's conversation—“I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.” Whenever Christian people meet together, they ought to make the subject of their mutual discourse an inquiry as to the progress of the kingdom of God in the place where they respectively dwell.

If you have come up from the country, we want you to tell us about the work of God in your village or in the town to which you belong—are there many conversions there? We also will tell you about the work in London. Thus should Christian brethren commune with one another, and ask concerning Christ's kingdom among men, and the progress that His Gospel is making.

3. *And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.*

They gave a correct description of the real state of affairs in Jerusalem. They did not color it, but they stated the actual facts. It is well, sometimes, to tell our Christian brethren about the low estate of Zion. Where things are not prospering as they should, it is best to say so, and not to try to smother up the truth and give a false report.

4. *And it came to pass, where I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven,*

This good man was greatly affected by the sad news which he heard. He was not indifferent to the condition of his countrymen. He did not say, "We are getting on very well here. I am a Jew and I am in the palace of Artaxerxes, but I cannot do anything to help my brethren. You, who are away there at Jerusalem, must do the best you can."

No, Nehemiah said no such thing. He looked upon himself as being part and parcel of the whole Jewish race, just as every true believer should regard all Christians as being near akin to himself. We are not twenty churches, brethren, nor two hundred—our Lord Jesus Christ is the Head and we are members of that one body which is His church.

We ought to sympathize with all who are in Christ and especially, if the cause of God is not prospering in any place, we should do as Nehemiah did—he wept, and mourned, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven. He tells us what he said in his prayer. These are, as it were, the shorthand notes of his supplication.

5-6. *And said, I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments: let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned.*

This is quite a model prayer. How earnest it is and how truthful! Nehemiah recognizes the terrible side of God's character as well as His mercifulness. He evidently had right views of God. Some people try to explain away all the passages of Scripture which represent God as a terrible God. Whether they know it or not, they will find this course of action to be a great source of weakness to them in dealing with the ungodly.

Nehemiah calls JEHOVAH "the great and terrible God," but he adds, "that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him." He tells us that he prayed before the Lord day and night. Of course he had to attend to his daily duties, so that he could not always be upon his knees, but his heart was praying even while he was engaged with other matters. And as often as he could, he retired to his room, so that he might cry out unto God.

Please observe that he makes a confession of "the sins of the children of Israel." It is our duty as Christians, as it were, to take the great load of the sins of the nation upon ourselves and to make confession of them before God. If the guilty ones will not repent, we must repent for them. If they will not confess their sins, we must confess their sins as though we stood in their stead. Nehemiah very pathetically says, "and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee." And then coming still more closely home, he adds, "both I and my father's house have sinned."

7-9. *We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses. Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations: but if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there.*

He quotes the covenant and he pleads the promise of JEHOVAH. Now, there is no means of getting a man to do us a favor so powerful as this, to quote his own promise. “You said You would do it.” So, here Nehemiah says, “Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses.”

10-11. *Now these are thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand. O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.*

That is, in the sight of King Artaxerxes to whom he was about to speak.

11. *For I was the king's cupbearer.*

He counts this as a high privilege, that he would be able to speak for his people to the great king who would give him the opportunity to go and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

HYMNS FROM “OUR OWN HYMN BOOK”—63 (Song 3), 116 (Song 3), 39

Taken from The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit C. H. Spurgeon Collection. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.